WILSON'S OIL HOUSE, LARD REFINERY,
AND EDIBLE FATS FACTORY
2801 S.W. 15th Street
Oklahoma City
Oklahoma County
Oklahoma

HAER No. OK-4

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

WILSON'S OIL HOUSE, LARD REFINERY, AND EDIBLE FATS FACTORY

Location: 2801 S.W. 15th, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, OK
Part of SW 1/4 of Sec. 6, T11N, R3W

Present Owner: Wilson's Food Corp.

Present Occupant: Wilson's Food Corp.

Present Use: Production of lard and vegetable shortening

Statement of Significance:

The Wilson's Oil House, Lard Refinery, and Edible Fata Factory are historically significant to Oklahoma City and the state for one primary reason--they are the last remaining remnants of the packing plant complex originally built in Oklahoma City in 1910 and 1911. In terms of commerce and trade, that complex made Oklahoma City a major meat packing center of the nation. And until Tinker Air Force Base was completed during WW II, the packing plants were the single largest employers in the state, adding considerable fuel to the engines of industry. Today, the Wilson's Oil House, Lard Refinery, and Edible Fats Factory are all that remain of that original complex.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Date of Construction: 1911

Architect: Unknown (blueprints indicate it was designed by company architects)

Construction: Schwartzchild and Sulzberger crews out of Chicago.

Historical Narrative:

In 1907 Oklahoma City was locked in urban rivalry with the state capital, Guthrie, and a handful of ambitious young cities such as Muskogee, Tulsa, and Shawnee. All were booming, all had populations from 15,000 to 30,000, and all were trying to attract industry.

To win this war Stanley Brock of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce sent flyers to every meat packing firm in the nation trying to attract them to his city. In 1909 representatives from Morris & Co. (later Armour) responded to the prospectus and decided to build a $3 million plant just southwest of the city. Construction began soon thereafter and the plant was opened in October of 1910.

Meanwhile a second major packer, Schwartzchild and Sulzberger (later Wilson's) was inspecting Oklahoma City. After the Chamber

of Commerce met their demands for a bonus and other concessions, work began on another new plant in July of 1911. When opened in October of 1911, the two packing plants and adjacent stockyards were employing almost 4,000 people with a capital investment of more than $6 million. With this major industry pumping money and jobs into Oklahoma City, the battle for urban supremacy was all but over. Oklahoma City was the state capital and the fastest growing city in the state and nation.

The S. & S. (Wilson's) Plant included more than 25-acres of floor space for the slaughter and processing of hogs and cattle. The largest buildings were the seven-floor beef slaughter house, the seven-floor beef cooler building, the seven-floor pork cooler building, and the seven-floor inedible tank house, where bones, horns, hoofs, and "sticks" were rendered into glue. Hogs also were killed on the top floor of that building. (All of these buildings would be demolished and replaced by 1965).

Next to these buildings were two smaller brick structures, the four-and-a-half story Oil House and Lard Refinery (bldgs. 8 and 9), and the three-story Edible Fats Factory (bldg. 7). The Oil House (bldg. 8), which was separated from the Lard Refinery only by a fire wall, was "fully equipped with cooking kettles, receiving kettles, tanks, presses, and everything necessary for the rendering of high-grade beef fats and the manufacture of oleo oil." Under the same roof but on the other side of the fire wall was the Lard Refinery (bldg. 9), which contained "rendering kettles, lard rolls, presses, and filters devoted to the manufacture of all kinds of lard and the refining of crude oil." This building was constructed with cast-iron support pillars, 6" x 12" wooden floor beams, yellow pine flooring, and a brick veneer.

Next door, just to the south, was the Edible Fats Factory (bldg. 7) constructed with largely the same specifications as the Oil House and Lard Refinery. Three stories tall, all floors in it apparently were lined with brick. The building "was devoted to the rendering of edible beef and pork fats."

Other structures included a three-story fertilizer building and several two-story buildings for shops, laundaries, stables, machine shops, and offices. (All of these would be torn down prior to 1965).

The packing plants quickly became the largest single-site employers in the state, drawing even more industries, jobs, and capital investments to Oklahoma City and the state. By 1920 Oklahoma City's population had topped 100,000 and would approach 200,000 by 1930. Much of this success was attributed to the packing plants, which from 1910 to 1935 accumulated impressive

figures: $500 million paid for livestock; $25 million paid in wages; $80 million paid for cotton oil; and another $200 million earned by directly related enterprises. If one single entity had to be selected as "the" reason for Oklahoma City's boom years, it had to be the packing plants and related stockyards.

In succeeding decades the meat packing business underwent major changes. In 1933, in an attempt to diversify and modernize the Oklahoma City plant, Wilson's & Co. upgraded the edible oil refinery. They added modern refining tubs, hydrogenation equipment, and deodorizing equipment, while completing a total redesign of the plant's interior. Still another modernization plan was implemented in the 1940s, further changing the mechanical layout and appearance of the structures. (This may have been the era when the one-story connecting building (hldg. 18) was built or modified).

In 1965 Wilson's undertook an even more extensive redesign of the entire operation in Oklahoma City. They tore down many of the original 1911 structures and built new, more modern facilities. In the old Oil House and Lard Refinery, they added a continuous deodorizer which made a major impact on operations. Each time a modern innovation was made, new pipes were added, utilization of floor space was changed, and the physical appearance of the structure continued to evolve.

By the 1970s and 1980s the packing houses were under seige from smaller, more efficient operations. Armour, which had started as Morris & Co., was closed and completely demolished. Wilson's, which had started as S. & S., survived, but at the expense of closing all slaughter house operations. Instead, the company decided to concentrate on two operations--meat processing and full-line refining. Today, using a combination of old and new equipment, the refinery converts rendered meat fats and refined vegetable oils into added value products used by consumers, food service end users, bakeries, and industrial food processors.

By 1986 the only three buildings remaining from the 1910-1911 packing plant era were the old Oil House, the Lard Refinery, and the Edible Fats Factory. All had been radically altered inside and out, but the brick veneer was still intact, preserving a story of continual modernization and technical change.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Architectural Merit and Interest

The three buildings of the Wilson's Oil House, Lard Refinery, and Edible Fats Factory are only shadows of their original design. What has survived is unornamented, industrial brick construction designed for function, not aesthetics.

Condition of Fabric

Poor (to be demolished)

Summary Description

The Wilson's complex consists of three structures: the Oil House and Lard Refinery (bldgs. 8 and 9, which actually appear as one building from the exterior and will be treated as one building in this description) is a four-story brick building measuring approximately 150' x 100'; the old Edible Fats Factory (bldg. 7), a three-story brick building also measuring approximately 150' x 100'; and a one-story, non-historical wooden structure (bldg. 18) connecting them.

The facades of both brick buildings are basically unadorned brick industrial. The only distinguishing features include rows of windows on all sides of the buildings (some are arched) and a half-story riser on the north and east sides of the northern-most building (bldgs. 8-9).

The buildings have been extensively modified by successive industrial changes, especially in 1933, 1965, and 1978. New docks have been added, several windows have been sealed, and external pipes have been added on every side. On the south side of the southern-most building (bldg. 7), a one-story brick and concrete block extension has been added, probably in the 1960s.

The brick is in poor condition, and in many places extensive repairs are needed. Windows are in poor condition, even though most have metal frames and sashes (the original wooden windows probably were replaced in the 1965 upgrading). The small connecting structure (bldg. 18) is faced with horizontal wooden siding, and appears to be of relatively modern construction.

The interiors of the buildings have been changed even more. The original wooden floors and open troughs were removed in 1933 and replaced with concrete or brick floors and sewage pipes overhead. At that same time many of the original cast-iron supports were reinforced and enclosed in concrete, and many of the floors were reinforced with metal beams. In a few places the original cast-iron supports and wooden floor joists can still be seen. In general, the interior is unfinished industrial with few distinguishing features.

Detailed Description of Exterior

1. Foundation: Reinforced concrete

2. Wall Construction: Exterior walls are constructed with red brick, and lack any distinguishing ornamentation.

3. Structural System: The superstructure consists of cast-iron support posts (9", 8", 7", and 6") with 14" x 16" horizontal wooden beams (Some reinforced concrete supports have been added during successive remodellings).

4. Openings, Doorways, and Windows: Because of extensive industrial alterations through the years, virtually every doorway has been changed since original construction. Many windows have been closed, but a few still reveal the arched configurations of the original design. The 1911 building probably incorporated wooden frames and sashes, but today every exposed window is fitted with metal frames. All doors and windows are in poor condition.

5. Roof: The original roofs were flat with a slight drop to the exterior walls. They were originally topped with a 4-ply tar and gravel surface.

Detailed Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans: All floors of the buildings were originally wide open, interrupted only by a firewall that separated the Oil House (bldg. 8) from the Lard Refinery (bldg. 9). Along the central bays on either side of the fire wall were elevators which would lift raw materials (tallow and lard) to the hasher and melting vats located on the top floors. Otherwise, all floor space was used for various stages of the refining, packaging, and storage processes.

2. Flooring: Original floors were concrete on the ground level and wooden on the upper floors. All drained into open gutters located between each bay. During successive industrial changes, the floors were either converted to bricks or concrete.

3. Wall and Ceiling Finish: All walls are unfinshed brick and all support beams are exposed to the floor below.

4. Interior Trim: The interior has always been rough finished, with no extraneous trim.

5. Hardware, Fixtures, Mechanical: All electrical and mechanical systems have undergone major changes during successive industrial modernizations. There are no oringinal features remaining.

Site and Surroundings:

The Wilson's Oil House, Lard Refinery, and Edible Fats Factory are part of a larger industrial complex that also includes meat processing and marketing. All other structures, however, date from the 1960s and in no way reflect the architectural style of the old buildings. Until the early 1980s, when hog and cattle slaughtering operations were halted, the industrial complex also included an extensive slaughter house. Within a few hundred feet is the Oklahoma National Stockyards, at one time the world's largest livestock market. When constructed, the entire complex was located about three miles west and a mile south of the central business district and along the banks of the North Canadian River. Today, the metropolitan area completely surrounds the Wilson's plant.

SOURCES OF PROJECT INFORMATION

Plans call for the demolition of the Wilson's Oil House, Lard Refinery, and Edible Fats Factory in the spring of 1987. This historical documentation, completed in March of 1987 by historian Bob L. Blackburn, Ph.D., was prepared for the City of Oklahoma City. The recordation and photodocumentation conform with the standards of the Historic American Engineering Record, U.S. Department of the Interior.

Sources

Bob L. Blackburn, The Heart of the Promised Land: An Illustrated History of Oklahoma County (Los Angeles: Windsor Publications, 1982).

Roy Stewart, Born Grown: A History of Oklahoma City (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, 1976).

"50 Years in Oklahoma: The Past is Prologue," a small booklet published by Wilson's in 1961.

Blueprints of the Oil House and Lard Refinery in the possession of Harvey Baxter, Refinery Manager, dated Dec. 7, 1910.

"Dedication of the Morris & Co. Plant," an article in the Daily Oklahoman, October 3, 1910.

"Opening of the S. & S. Plant," an article in the Daily Oklahoman, October 8, 1911. This article gives a detailed description of the Wilson's plant as originally constructed.

A series of articles written by Gilbert Hill in the Daily Oklahoman from October 7 to October 11, 1935, during the silver celebration of the plant's construction.

Interviews with Harvey Baxter, Wilson's Plant Manager, Nov. 13, 1986, Dec. 8, 1986, and Dec. 9, 1986.

Documentation completed by: Bob L. Blackburn, Ph.D., Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

This sketch is a cut-away of the south side of the Oil House (left side of the firewall) and the Lard Refinery (right). Based on the only set of blue prints and specifications from the 1911 construction, this sketch illustrates how fatty meat products were lifted via elevator to the half-story of the Oil House, then put through the hasher, dumped into the melting kettle, and deposited into the settling kettle. Apparently the rest of the procedure included pressing through cloth to remove more impurities and the final packaging. Not until the 1930s did the plant implement hydrogenization or deodorization.